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SUBJECT: MALI INTERCEPTS 26 TRAFFICKED CHILDREN IN KITA

¶1. On March 12 police in the western town of Kita intercepted 26 children who were trafficked to Kita from towns along the Guinea-Mali frontier. The children ranged in age from 6 to 17. Two of the children were Malian, and the rest Guinean nationals. Four suspects are currently under arrest in Kita. Alou Barry, who directs Mali's anti-trafficking efforts from within the Ministry for the Promotion of Women, Children and Families (MPFEF), said he expected the four individuals to be tried shortly.

¶2. The two Malian children were returned to their families. The remaining 24 Guinean children spent the nights of March 12-13 in a transit center in Kita run by the NGO Caritas before being transferred to Bamako. Malian and Guinean authorities repatriated them to the Guinean town of Siguri on March 29.

¶3. Police have not revealed the names of the suspected traffickers now in custody. One of the four individuals is a marabout. It is not uncommon for poor families in rural areas to entrust children to the care of self-described marabouts who in turn promise to provide a semblance of Koranic education. Many of these children, who are often under the age of ten, are subsequently transported to distant locations and forced to work in fields or beg on the streets. A 2005 UNICEF study of Koranic schools in the Malian town of Mopti found that children attending these schools spent the majority of their time begging or working in fields.

¶4. Alou Barry credited a January 17-19, 2008, anti-TIP conference for Malian and Guinean officials in Kankan, Guinea, with reinforcing the communication links between Malian and Guinean authorities that helped police in Kita close in on the four suspected traffickers. He also said the Kita police relied on 2007 anti-TIP training provided by NGOs and the Malian government to rapidly determine that the marabout and his accomplices lacked required parental authorizations and other documents which would have enabled them to legally travel with the group of children.

LEONARD